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ABSTRACT

The examination of the journal (written in 1875) of a student of the Patterson Institute, a "female college" in Kentucky, reveals a young woman with a divided self--one part accepting her teacher's demands, the other undermining the daily writing assignment and the school's rules through acknowledged deception, sly subversion, mockery, and open contradiction. The 15-year-old student's journal entries show a definite structure. They usually begin with a paragraph of "purple prose" along somber lines, followed by references to the weather, and then list daily happenings in relative order of importance. More than anything, however, the young woman is concerned with the writing and grading of the journals. The head of the school teaches rhetoric, and to assure academic performance, he plays on the girls' insecurities and need for acceptance. Although use of a daily journal for writing practice represented a pedagogical innovation, entries were supposed to demonstrate "thought" and convince through examples. The student's struggle for self-definition unfolds through her journal writing until she finally surrenders to her need for acceptance and conforms to her teacher's expectations. Are the classroom journals of today really a means of student empowerment or yet another way of socialization and acculturation? (NKA)

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DOUBLE-VOICED DISCOURSE: A YOUNG WOMAN'S JOURNAL FROM A NINETEENTH-CENTURY COMPOSITION CLASS

(Paper presented at CCCC 1991, Boston)

In 1867, the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Kentucky decreed that a "female college . . . [be] authorized and established at North Middletown . . . to be known and styled 'The Patterson Institute,' with J.T. Patterson as its principal or president" (160). Today, all that is left of the former Institute are twenty-one journals, written by its women students as a daily composition exercise. One of the most articulate and personal diaries in the collection belonged to fifteen-year old Corrie McClure from Flemingsburg, Kentucky. Written between September 13 and November 27 of 1875, Corrie's journal reflects the "double-voiced discourse" (Showalter 27-31) between muted and dominant groups, in this case between young woman and patriarchal Patterson Institute. Using the language of those in power, Corrie's writing depicts a self divided, one part accepting her teachers' demands, another undermining the daily writing assignment and the school's rules through acknowledged deception, sly subversion, mockery, and open contradiction. Yet her struggle for an independent self is doomed. For while Corrie at times boldly transcends the established structures, she finally succumbs to her teachers' efforts at acculturation.

When Corrie arrives at the Institute, she has just spent a

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glorious summer at home. A senior now, she feels "lowered from the towering heights of young lady-hood, into the more common-place position of a school-girl" (1). The Institute is small (113), as is its staff, and students arrive and leave at will (46). Mr. Patterson, teacher of Testament and Rhetoric, runs the place. Phrases like "he has decreed" (3), "his law is like that of the 'Medes and Persians'" (71), and "he is the Legislator in this establishment" (153) attest to the authority Patterson assumes and receives. He decides room assignments, chores and social interactions (26; 41-42; 178); he prescribes and monitors the girls' behavior in chapel, halls, and dining room (4; 59; 109-110); and he controls their extracurricular activities as well--literary society meetings and exercises, Sunday church attendance, outings, visitors, even the daily mail (9; 15; 16; 25; 95; 101; 103; 115; 178-79). His very countenance influences his students' day. Corrie remarks, "Of course, when Mr. Patterson's face does not look all right, we do not feel like we could be enjoying ourselves" (143).

To assure academic performance, Patterson plays on the girls' insecurity and need for acceptance. Arbitrary and unexplained marks like C, O, L, or U keep students' attention and anxiety at a constant high pitch. Corrie frequently complains, "I would give considerable to know what those 'Egyptian Hydroglyphs' [sic] mean, but . . . the President . . . complacently sits and smiles down upon us, as much as to say, 'Don't you wish you knew'" (98). Extolling the virtues of the "good girl" over those of the "Valedictorian" describes yet another of Patterson's controls.

Corrie falls for it and writes, "I am in hopes I possess the virtues; for it would be quite gratifying to me, to be considered one of the good girls, and be looked upon as such by our President" (52).

As part of his students's rhetorical practice, President Patterson emphasizes the daily journal. While none of the girls likes the idea, few voice their dislike as eloquently as Corrie: "My writing genius has not yet made its appearance, but Prof.'s word is law in this domain, and when he speaks, we all hasten to obey. He has decreed we shall all write journals" (3). Another time she writes, "Again I have proffered myself to perform the unpleasant task of writing my journal, but I feel myself incompetent to the task, nevertheless, a journal must be written, and not a thought have I to write,--no, not one" (59).

While personal forms of writing--essays, letters, diaries--were certainly nineteenth-century fashion, their use in class meant pedagogical innovation. To Patterson, the journal must have seemed a natural way to increase his students'rhetorical training and at the same time encourage the development of their critical sensibilities, for entries always needed to demonstrate "thought" and convince through examples (29). But what happens to a diary, an intimate and voluntary undertaking, when its writing becomes prescribed? Corrie must have sensed this tension between private inspiration and institutional assignment when she writes, "I don't think we ought to be compelled to write journals except when we take a 'writing spell'" (60). She does not possess the "chief prerequisites" of the diarist, i.e., "anonymity and time"

(Gillikin 127). Neither does she live and study in an atmosphere of trust (Frey 517) or experience the "fairly benign authorities" that might allow her to grow, both as a person and as a writer (Belenky et al. 90). In the end she abandons the struggle for self definition, accepting instead the ready-made role of Patterson's "good girl (52).

Corrie's journal entries show a definite structure. They usually begin with a "commencement," a paragraph of purple prose along mostly somber lines: "One more day has come and gone. One more day nearer God. This, as all others, has brought joy to some, and to others, sorrows and disappointments. Some have gone to the festal board, where joy and gladness rule the hour, and others, alas have followed to the grave some loved one, have seen them hidd forever from their sight, heard the clods fall heavily upon the coffin lid, bid them one long silent fare well, and have tried to say, even with a breaking heart, 'Thy will, not mine, be done.' Such is life" (4-5).

Carrie follows her flowery introductions with references to the weather and then lists daily happenings in relative importance--visitors to the Institute, events in the classroom, scarcity of food, outings, jealousies, illness, and homesickness (15, 96, 105). But more than anything, the writing and grading of journals occupy her mind. Once a week the notebooks are "corrected" by Patterson and, occasionally, the other teachers. The dreaded grades call for some of Corrie's most moving entries: "And we now see the face of one girl who has been fortunate enough to get a perfect mark . . . , all radiant with smiles, . . . but

another comes slowly towards us,--behold the frown that darkens the face and the traces of recent tears upon her cheeks!" (106). About her own "failure" Corrie writes, "My worst fears were confirmed,--my hopes shattered,--my'air-castles' destroyed, by stubborn facts; one of which is (shocking to relate) my diary was only a page and half in length, and more than this, it was covered with blots, and contained six mistakes" (157). On days like that, and most of Corrie's days seem that way, she feels betrayed, "Is it true I am eating my 'white bread'"? she asks. "They tell me these are my happiest days, but I am strongly inclined to doubt it. Well, all I have to say is, that I dread the time when I am to partake of my 'black bread.' I think the bread is both black and bitter now" (60).

Corrie's desire to remain the young lady conflicts with her ambition to become the perfect 'school-girl.' While she vows to pit "my intellect, my determination, and my power of endurance" against her classmates, she also writes, "If diligent study, and strict obedience to the rules of the school will win the honor of my class, I am resolved to be the victorious one" (1). And so for most of the journal she shares the plight of the school-girl, describing it in bleak colors, "Truly, the woes of school-girls are great" (47). Their duties "loom up . . . like the 'giant of despair'" and "desperate efforts" are needed from dawn until dusk (32). Humiliation and derision is the school-girl's lot should she fail (61).

As much as Corrie dislikes writing her journal, the two of them develop a special, albeit ambiguous, relationship. The

journal is at once a girl like herself and not a girl, someone she would like to trust but must distrust at the same time, a friend and also an enemy. Teasingly she writes about a secret, "It would not do to divulge it to you: for you know, Journal, you are something of a 'tattler'" (63). Another time we sense a male reader, "But, (as you are not a descendant of mother Eve's) I suppose you do not care to hear what it is" (99). Whenever she fails, her feeling that the journal is at once a friend and a traitor deepens. The journal invites confidences and encourages a writing style that is free, easy, and expressive, but its readers betray the very trust offered to them by insisting on correctness. Corrie rightfully complains, "I had quite a cry this morning, and you, Journal, although you pretend to be my friend, was [sic] the cause of it" (130). In mid-November she realizes that Patterson enjoys secrets: "But knowing my friend Journal is not altogether devoid of that feminine weakness . . . curiosity, I will explain" (156). As her socialization nears its completion, Corrie has accepted the journal as friend. She writes, feeling very blue, "Now, Journal, . . . knowing you to be a 'true and tried' friend, I would divulge to you many things, which I would not entrust to a less worthy confidant" (154).

To struggle against Patterson's Institute is, as it turns out in Corrie's pages, to struggle against terrible odds. That the odds win does not diminish the valiant fight Corrie wages in the beginning. Then, just back from months of relative freedom, she is still able to assert herself, undercutting the Institute's pull in several ways, among them (1) acknowledged deception, (2)

sly subversion, (3) mockery, and (4) open contradiction. 1. Acknowledged Deception: On arrival Corrie gives Patterson her "sweetest smile" to make a "very favorable impression" (2). When his niece visits, she is treated with special courtesy and Corrie writes, "Of course, as she is a relative of Prof.'s we all like her ever so much" (4). Being ordered to go to church, Corrie admits, "I felt as if it would almost kill me to listen to Brother Jones for an hour or two. . . . At last, . . . we concluded it best for us to go" (44). When she hears that the other teachers will grade the journals, she writes, "I believe I will use a little policy, in regard to these two people, and flatter them in every journal I write until the fatal Friday" (122).

2. Sly Subversion: At times Corrie masterly subverts what she is expected to honor. After dutifully describing Patterson's lecture on the idols of fashionable women, Corrie rejects being included and quickly shifts to her own concerns: "I think I will sleep in the morning" (57-59). If she is cross with Patterson, even the Testament lesson she usually approves of, may just get the comment "tolerably interesting" (140). When a friend may not sit with her in the dining room and complains of it as a figurative box in the jaw, she counters with "The Testament lesson was not at all interesting, therefore, I will write nothing more about it" (110). Of course, the journal assignment itself invites subversion daily, and hardly a writing session passes when Corrie doesn't complain. Calling the exercise a "stupendous task," (96) or the "regular old 'routine'" (137), she finds it "disagreeable" when she is not in a "writing humor," (111) and is

not above writing just about anything, "even if I have to 'manufacture' it" (136).

3. Mockery: Corrie enjoys displaying her wit, the powerful tool of the weak, even when dealing with subjects considered sacred. Patterson's admonition that "order [is] Heaven's first law," gets the trunks moved but also receives Corrie's quip, " [We] try and have [a] little order in our room, although it is not quite a little Heaven" (6). In doing away with the 'commencement' on a particular Sunday, she does not fear committing sacrilege, "Well, I suppose it is scarcely necessary to write a page or two, and discourse largely upon this 'lovely Lords-day' and speak of its being sacred and so" (64). Church attendance is often a thorn in her side, but one time she achieves intellectual victory: "The decree went forth this morning that every one of us must go to church. Now I had made up my mind to stay at home, but the 'black marks' which I was confident I would receive if I was guilty of such an atrocious crime, loomed up threateningly in the distant." 'Aunt Lou' (presumably Mrs. Patterson) allows her to stay home but says "it was a shame and a sin for a member of the church not to go to church every Sunday and partake of the Lord's Suppper." Corrie is quick to counter that she "considered it no more of a sin than to be forced to go, and then partake of it" (64-65).

4. Open Contradiction: Many times, especially during the early entries, Corrie's struggling self does not use sublety or humor but bluntly contradicts those in power. 'Commencements' are certainly not her favorite: "Journal, I do not feel at all like becoming poetical or sentimental this afternoon, so I will be

compelled to confine myself to a base recital of facts" (114). She will even attack Patterson's sample introduction which reads, "The heavens are all overspread with clouds today, and there is a promise in them that the parched and thirsty earth will be refreshed by a fall of rain" (6). Corrie distances herself from this sentiment and sets her own against it, "Journal, the above four lines are the composition of Mr. Patterson. I cannot say I wish for rain. Nothing gives me the blues sooner than a dark, gloomy, disagreeable day" (6-7).

Still, Patterson exerts a tremendous power over Corrie. On the surface this is not visible, for on November 16, Corrie begins writing "back-hand" (152). For all but the last page of the journal, Corrie's entries are slanted to the left, perhaps an outward sign of her inner struggles. It is her last stand, for by November 27, Corrie seems to have accepted her institutional role. I felt surprized, but reading significant passages of the journal again, it is clear that Corrie's process of acculturation had started the day she entered the Institute. It found a willing partner in her "Welch pride and McClure ambition," characteristics that make her write, "I would give anything in reason if I could get a perfect mark" (8). Corrie's other soft spot is her need for acceptance. Having lost her mother, and presumably her father, she cannot resist Patterson's fatherly approach and clearly wants to be loved and preferred by him. A telling entry says, "I am almost heartsick. I am mad,--ill-humored,--homesick, jealous. . . . I went to the chapel, sought consolation, but finding none, I abused . . . President Patterson. I accused him of partiality,

and even insinuated that he did not love me as well as some others in the house" (70-71). At one point in her journal, Corrie had called the girls hypocrites for feigning interest in their diaries. By late November she tops them all by joining the other side. Anxious to keep in Patterson's "good graces," she tells on a classmate who has caused her great harm and writes, "The President had better look into Lucie's correspondents" (162). From then on the President opens and reads all letters. Pretending innocence, she writes a few days later, "I heard that some of the girls had been getting into mischief, and the President was trying to discover the guilty party. Thank goodness! I am above suspicion. I received a letter but it was unbroken" (178-79).

At this point she seems completely won over. The day before Thanksgiving she writes, "I do not feel at all like writing tonight, but my journal is something that cannot be neglected. I sometimes wish I only had to write when 'the spirit moved me,' but when I meditate for a moment on the subject, I see the wisdom in my present course; therefore I am compelled to bow my head in silent submission to the President's will and word" (180). Her last entry slants to the right again and mentions a confidential talk with Patterson in the chapel. She feels "highly honored, by the confidence which he imposed in me. I think the President is the very personification of prudence and kindness. My writing back-hand has 'played out,' and I will now continue writing 'the same' old hand. I expect it is the better after all" (186).

Stephen M. North says of historical research: "Simply contributing to the communal narrative, it would seem, is not

quite enough; here is a need, bordering on compulsion, to draw for readers . . . some moral from the story, some lessons from history" (87). What lesson then, what moral, are we supposed to draw from Corrie's journal? As a historian of "what is" rather than of "what ought to be" (Nan Johnson), I propose seeing Patterson's Institute as a particular place in a particular time, feeling its way with some innovative pedagogy. Other nineteenth-century schools offer different histories, some of which speak of student empowerment instead of acculturation. Let us instead look at our own methods of using journals. Are they the liberating and empowering force we claim them to be? And are our classrooms providing the atmosphere of trust and mutual respect our students need in order to write? Or are we using journals as yet another way of socialization and acculturation?

I leave you with these questions.

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